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The AOL Time Warner Foundation: Corporate Partnering

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By **Mark Szymanski** <marks@pacificu.edu>

This is the third in a four part series of articles highlighting funding sources that help bridge the digital divide. The web site, The Digital Divide Network (1), highlights three primary categories of funding sources that can be accessed by those seeking to bridge the digital divide: funding from corporate sources, private sources, and government sources. In this column I will examine the AOL Time Warner Foundation (2), a corporate funding source that seeks to bridge the digital divide through, media, communications, and information technology.

According to their web site, AOL Time Warner is the world's leading media and entertainment company, whose businesses include interactive services, cable systems, filmed entertainment, television networks, music and publishing (3).

FCC deregulation created as an opportunity for AOL and Time Warner to merge resources and increase the number and kinds of products and services they could offer to consumers. In this case both AOL, which had the communication services, and Time Warner, which had the products, saw the future as connected and integrated; media and communications in all forms text, audio, and video, could be and would be integrated or separated and transferred through a number of evolving mediums.

With AOL carving out it's place as the general public's connection to the internet and Time Warner coloring our black and white classics, AOL Time Warner has still found time to create the AOL Time Warner Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the corporation.

AOL Time Warner speculated that if they could get people accustomed to using their specific products and services, it would increase the number of loyal returning customers. As a result, software upgrade and ISP subscription marketing strategies have fueled company's business on the AOL side. The AOL Time Warner foundation has parlayed this strategy and success into its

operational plan. With the digital divide so wide, and funding from government sources decreasing, it's difficult for community organizations and schools in need to say no to free hardware, software, and human time, even if it comes with a proprietary angle.

The foundation has supported a large number of projects which help bridge the digital divide and are in alignment with the stated goals of the foundation: equipping kids for the 21st century; extending Internet benefits to all; engaging communities in the arts; and empowering citizens and civic participation.

As the foundation points on their web site, "as internet use has increased across all demographic groups, African-Americans, Latinos, seniors (age 50 and older), individuals with disabilities, and single-parent households remain 20 to 30 percentage points behind the national average" (4). Thoughtfully, they point out that the benefit of connecting these targeted groups is that it will increase their social, political, and economic participation at the local, national and international level.

To accomplish this, the AOL Time Warner Foundation has created and supported a number of projects. All of their projects emphasize entering into partnerships with other organizations. In their words: "they desire to enter into sustainable strategic partnerships with organizations that have a demonstrated commitment to pioneering innovative ways of meeting their four funding priorities. This seems like a sound strategy and a recognition that the collective strengths of a number of organizations can be a powerful tool to foster positive change in traditionally underserved populations.

All of the education initiatives that the foundation has supported can be viewed on their web site (5). The projects cover broad geographic and subject areas. After a description of each project and a link to the project web site, each project that has been completed has an evaluative summary.

For example, a project called the Interactive Education Initiative provided start-up funds to 150 teams of educators, administrators, parents and community leaders across the country to develop hands-on projects that use interactive technology to improve student learning. Grant recipients also received in-kind support and free AOL accounts (6). A link off this site is lessons learned where the evaluation describes the outcomes of the project as well as the impediments to success. I applaud the foundation's honesty in this matter. Partnering with other organizations and working with underserved populations involves a number of challenges and opportunities that can become learning experiences for future projects.

In addition to the many education projects the foundation has supported, one of the projects the foundation continues to support is the digital divide network web site (7). The digital divide network was the subject of the first article in this series (8). The web site is unique because in addition to bridging the traditional digital divide, it bridges the traditional divisions between corporate, government, and foundation funding sources. Thus, AOL Time Warner has exercised

it's commitment to partnerships that cross traditional boundaries.

In the end, all funding sources for the digital divide will bring their philosophical and pragmatic motives to projects designed to decrease the digital divide. Most corporate funding sources will use their products and services in the projects. This will certainly help their business as well as the community. Whether their desire is solely to increase their market share or solely to help the community, we might never know. In all honesty, it's probably a bit of both. Whatever the case, most of us will happily accept the help and the resulting benefits for our underserved populations.

References:

- (1) <http://www.digitaldividenetwork.org>
- (2) <http://www.aoltwfoundation.org>
- (3) http://www.aoltw.com/corporate_information/index.adp
- (4) <http://www.aoltwfoundation.org/whatwedo/whatwedo.html>
- (5) <http://aoltimewarnerfoundation.org/topic/education.html>
- (6) <http://aoltimewarnerfoundation.org/equip/iei.html>
- (7) <http://aoltimewarnerfoundation.org/topic/education.html>
- (8) <http://bcis.pacificu.edu/journal/2002/08/grants.php>

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